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Michelle Leach

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SEARCHING FOR BARBIE: Women & Beauty in Advertising

By Michelle Leach

Barbie Doll

This girlchild was born as usual
and presented dolls that did pee-pee
and miniature GE stoves and irons
and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.
Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:
You have a great big nose and fat legs.

She was healthy, tested intelligent,
possessed strong arms and back,
abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity.
She went to and fro apologizing.
Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.

She was advised to play coy,
exhorted to come on hearty,
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.
Her good nature wore out
like a fan belt.
So she cut off her nose and her legs
and offered them up.

In the casket displayed on satin she lay
with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,
a turned-up putty nose,
dressed in a pink and white nightie.
Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.
Consummation at last.
To every woman a happy ending.

Marge Piercy

A 1925 Life advertisement depicts a work-hungry husband initially angered at his wife’s demands for a new washing machine. He eventually surrenders to his wife’s request and recognizes that it is “advertising that makes America hum...Makes us
want something. And the world is so much better for our heaving a little harder” (Barthel 7). Advertising promotes the American Dream, a pursuit that often requires “heaving a little harder.” In the advertising world dominated by men but made for women, “heaving a little harder” often culminates in disaster. “Heaving a little harder” can easily be transformed into “heaving too hard,” from the seemingly subtle painting of one’s face to the potentially deadly dieting trap. Women become trapped in beauty rituals in an attempt to achieve the advertiser’s ideal yet often impossible image. In pursuing the ideal image, women attain and become the object of pursuit—rather than attaining the values that will achieve a truly “happy ending.”

The most basic pursuit of the advertising artist is to “promise that products can be read by others” (Barthel 88). In doing so, the advertisements help to create shared meanings as to what goods have high status, worth, and beauty, based in large part on how much they cost. The advertising world is also inward-looking. If something catches on in the advertising world, a snowball effect can develop—an idea or a trend or a style may receive coverage which has no relation at all to its hold, relevance or popularity at large. These trends are held in the hands of a select group of media practitioners. It is their taste, their choice, which is crucial, and what they prefer are “nice-looking objects, or things which photograph well, which look ‘right’” (Millum 51). From these basic motives emerges a world that is rocked by an array of moods, models, mottoes, talents, tastes, slogans, lessons, phrases, and pictures.

The advertising artist’s awareness of his power to impress images, tastes, trends, and styles on the masses is not a new revelation. At the beginning of the century, advertisers sought simple brand-name publicity through advertising jingles and poster-style displays. Then advertisers turned to hard-selling copy that screamed of reasons and arguments for products, to replace catchy rhymes and slogans. The next approach was to use the “walking advertisement,” the salesman, who had an arsenal of factual and emotional arguments to appeal to the pathos and integrity of the consumer. During this time period, advertisers were often encouraged to use emotional appeal and human interest to seize potential consumers. By 1914, advertisers offered a substantial change in “how” and “what” was being advertised. Instead of advertising the product, advertisers became aware of the results of advertising the benefits of the product—sex appeal instead of mere soap, prestige and power instead of mere automobiles (Marchand 10).

For more than a century, Americans were aware of a dynamic new social change, but the 1920s catapulted America into an obsession with social change. With the
advent of scientific inventions and technological advances, advertisers were increasingly needed to act as heralds. In the modern industrial world, the advertising men (as they are often referred to, a reminder of the overwhelming male dominance in the process of developing and approving advertisements) served as “town criers” who sported their wares in the form of ad-blaring publication. Advertising leaders wallowed in the 1920s era, when the technological world was wildly picking up tempo. Everything new was now “quick” and efficient, from “quick tabloid newspapers” to “quick news summaries” to even “quick-service filling stations.” Cities exploded with skyscraper skylines, vehicles were beginning to dominate the highways, and industrial production doubled with the onslaught of electrification and the assembly line process. Factories screamed of widespread production, and industrial structures were formed where employers no longer knew their employees. This exhilaration caused great anxiety about the maintenance of social stability. Family stability, moral standards, and paternal authority were threatened by such elements as jazz, bobbed hair, cosmetics, and a new sexual frankness. Thus, prohibition, immigration restrictions, and warnings of the dangers posed by the “new women” and “flaming youth” stood as symbols of anxiety about the changing face of society. It was the advertising creators who seized the public’s exhilaration and highlighted such perceptions for their own benefit (Marchand 4).

Such highlights paid off for advertisers. Maxwell House Coffee expanded its magazine budget from $19,955 to $509,000 during the years from 1921 to 1927 alone. Within two years, J. Walter Thompson, the largest New York agency of the time, increased its staff from 177 to 283. The influence of advertising rose to new heights when President Calvin Coolidge made an address to the American Association of Advertising convention in the fall of 1926. Coolidge, foreshadowing the advertiser’s intense power, observed that advertising men were “molding the human mind,” and he thrust upon them the “high responsibility of inspiring and ennobling the commercial world” (Marchand 9).

These advertising men fulfilled Coolidge’s statement by increasing their intense and fatal attraction for women, an attraction that became more intense with each passing year, with more ads targeted toward females. Women became the adopted advertiser audience with the acceptance of the adage “the hand that rocks the cradle, is the hand that buys the boots” (Loeb 5). Women were also considered to be voracious readers and to take greater interest in ads than men. Even in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, peddlers sought women as potential
consumers. These traveling salesmen “dealt in images and the desire for the unknown” (Ewen 37). They brought to the predominantly country-dwelling woman “the world of the city...employing language of allure, glamour, and spectacle. Women whose hands have spun drab, homemade cloth were treated to the attractive promise of gaily colored calico and gingham, which showed no trace of the working conditions of the early textile mills from which they came” (Ewen 37). By 1913, one advertising agency claimed that advertisers were rejecting male viewpoints entirely when creating ads. This advertising obsession with women was demonstrated well by an account in *Printer’s Ink Monthly* of the role of “representative consumer” often played by the “ad man’s wife”:

This is the sad tale of the ad man’s wife  
A tragic glimpse into her life  
A jibe at the Fates that Cruelly doom her  
To play the role of the “Great Consumer”  

Of how her advertising spouse  
Goes snooping for copy around the house  
While he drives her near the brink of distraction  
With his “Dear, I’d like to get your reaction!”

(Marchand 76)

Even the “demure” Victorian woman of the nineteenth century could not escape the blunt ads and was subjected to all the “puffery and paraphernalia that a Victorian consumer society could supply” (Loeb 5). In the 1880s, with all its “puffery and paraphernalia,” the advertisement was readily recognized as both a “mirror and an instrument of the social ideal” (Loeb 5). The social ideal suggested that, with the “acquisition of creams to whiten the complexion, fringes to improve the coiffure, and corsets to mold the female figures it was possible to create the illusion of the ‘perfect lady,’ a beacon of Victorian influence” (Loeb 19). Women were subjected to a variety of ads illustrating this “perfect lady”—the foremost ad often depicting women holding mirrors and gazing at their reflections. The advertisers, in this way, were “borrowing from a tradition of art” where they “generously supplied their female subjects with mirrors as surrogates and symbols of these judgmental gazes of the world outside the boudoir” (Marchand 175). For the male copywriter or illustrator, the mirror served to “epitomize women’s supposedly unrivaled addiction to vanity” (Marchand 176), and this addiction, according to Anne Hollander, is a dangerous
one. As an “aspiring Venus,” Hollander suggests that the “ordinary woman who looks in a mirror may be thwarted by the inadequacy of her perceived image. Alternately, through vanity, she may magnify her own beauty and become dangerously self-absorbed” (Loeb 42). The mirror motif not only reinforced self-absorption but also the ideal of the Victorian woman as an ornament, and the expectation that the middle class woman should expend considerable time, effort, and money in her quest for beauty.

This “quest for beauty” was marked by ads that intimidatingly demanded “What Do Men Think When They Look at You?” and reminded one that “Someone’s Eyes Are Forever Searching Your Face, Comparing You With Other Women” (Marchand 176). It is no wonder that such ads, even in the nineteenth century, spurred a dangerously intense ambition for women to transcend the beauty of other women. Such beauty was often achieved through what Havelock Ellis, author of Studies in the Psychology of Sense, called “bodily restriction.” Ellis wrote that one such restriction, the corset, made “breathing thoracic instead of abdominal, thereby keeping the bosom in a constant and, presumably, sexually attractive state of movement” (Ewen 99). This inhibited form of breathing induced fainting, as a result of debilitating pressure on the internal organs. Corsetry, in turn, produced a female population that was perpetually short of breath. Disease became an essential part of womanhood. Fashion economist Paul Nystrom revealed that “paleness, frequent fainting and ailing bodies were prized as desirable features of fashionable life” (Ewen 100). Corsets further cramped the stomach and thereby diminished the appetite. In this way, it was easier for a woman to deprive herself of food in a time when appetite was considered vulgar. Historian Pearl Binder noted that “It was much easier to go into decline than to confess to an appetite for earthly food” (Ewen 101.).

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the corset came under resounding attack, and Dr. Franz Gerard announced that corsets were actually causing enteroptose or the dropping of the female abdominal organs. The response by the fashion industry was to create a corset that pushed up instead of down. The result was only new symptoms of equally debilitating proportion, as this new corset reached “so far in the opposite direction that it was pushing the bowels out of place upward instead of downward” (Ewen 101). Arabella Kenealy responded by publishing “The Curse of the Corsets,” where she observed that monkeys put into corsets died within a matter of days. The fashion industry’s corset replacement was no better. Instead of constricting the abdomen, the innovative “hobble skirt” constricted the lower legs (Ewen 102).
Sacrificing one’s health for the Fashion Gods, needless to say, created a huge boom in the medical and therapeutical industry. The health ailments that sent women to medical experts were so generalized that during the 1830s and 1840s the customary greeting was changed from “Good Morning” to “How is your health?” and this change in convention lives on today in the form of “How are you?” These restrictive practices, that actually shaped even a daily convention, placed women on a pedestal, above concerns of trade and sexuality, which restrictive attire such as the corset promoted with explicit manipulations of the feminine figure. The corset produced many generations to come whose concerns focused on the body. The predominant ideology established that the proper woman denied herself even the most basic, natural elements of life found in her unrestricted body (Ewen 101).

Advertisers continued to exercise their power over women. Women’s magazines served as the ultimate power trip and provided the advertiser’s fast link to money, fame, and readership. In 1926, the *Ladies Home Journal*, in its largest issue yet published, bloated to 270 pages. Of those 270 pages, 162 pages were commanded by ads. The power of the ad could not be denied. Many of these ads were littered with tactics that ran rampant in the 1920s, including the use of “scare copy.” Scare copy was a tactic known in trade jargon as “negative appeal,” which sought to jolt the consumer by enacting failures ranging from unhappy marriages, to lost jobs, to romances cut short. And the product always offered the answer for “why” the romance was cut short or “why” the marriage failed. The solution was the product and a change in the consumer. One such ad that used a scare tactic and posed an intimidating question magnified the mirror ads of the Victorian era. This 1926 Listerine ad relays the tale of a girl with every advantage who failed to marry due to one unsuspected fault:

What secret is your mirror holding back?
Night after night, she would peer questioningly into her mirror, vainly seeking the reason.
She was a beautiful girl and talented, too. She had the advantages of education and better clothes than most girls in her set. She possessed that culture and poise which travel brings.
Yet in the one pursuit that stands foremost in the mind of every girl and women—marriage—she was a failure.
Many men came and went in her life. She was often a bridesmaid but never a bride. And the secret her mirror held back concerned a thing she least suspected—a thing people simply will not tell you to your face.

(Marchand 19)
The ad goes on to reveal the girl’s “fault”: “That’s the insidious thing about halitosis (unpleasant breath).” It offers a cure: “the systematic use of Listerine puts you on the safe and polite side. You know your breath is right. Fastidious people everywhere are making it part of their daily routine” (Marchand 19).

The mirror was used intimidatingly and blatantly in many other ads as well. By surrounding women with mirrors, advertisements reinforced each reader’s sense of living constantly under the world’s judgmental gaze. One ad for Radio Sales, Inc., suggestively associated a woman’s narcissism with the ease with which others could “make up her mind” with the title “Make Up Her Mind While She Makes Up Her Face.” The ad featured a young woman at her vanity applying makeup, while the radio blared a jingle which sang “for the proper care of your skin” (Marchand 177). Thus, while the woman passively sat applying the things that bought her beauty, the radio dominated by men could “make up her mind” and reach the unsuspecting and narcissistic women’s audience.

By observing ads that reflect the male perception of women, one can see the origin of the chasm between men’s and women’s portrayals in ads—a chasm perpetuated only with a steady flow of gender-conscious ads. Portraying the sexes in different lights instills a dark and unhealthy image. Even the 1943 *Times Literary Supplement* declared that “advertising can, and sometimes does, set up false ideals and appeal to unworthy motives” (Millum 15). Advertisements indicated that the “social language of men’s clothing tended to denote activity and industriousness, the idiom of women’s clothing was fragility, idleness, and conspicuous consumption of cloth” (Millum 97). The need for women to maintain these qualities was enforced with the appearance of the mirror ads that depicted a woman partaking in an act which requires little physical exertion. Advertising illustrations further reflected and enforced power differences between men and women. Ads had the “tendency to interpret women’s modernity in a ‘fashion’ sense and to define the status of ‘decorative object’ as one of her ‘natural and appropriate roles’ (Ewen 105). In this way, woman is diminished to the role of object, to be moved and controlled by the stronger man. Ideals about power still exist, and society has ensnared the idea that “a man’s appearance communicates his power to affect others. A woman’s appearance, by contrast, communicates her presence, how she takes herself” (Barthel 88). The woman’s outward attributes were valued and continue to be valued in the ad, whereas the man’s inner qualities are sharply in focus.
A sharp beauty prescription came into focus with the advent of consumerism and industry and the advertising tableaux of the 1920s and 1930s. These ads were based on geometric motifs of modern art. The “Fisher Body Girl” was established as the normative image for women in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This heroine of the Fisher Body ads was “slender, youthful, and sophisticated. Her finely etched facial features formed a slightly aloof smile, suggesting demure self-confidence in her obvious social prestige and her understated sexual allure” (Marchand 179). The Fisher Body Girl was a beacon of confidence and elegance, whereas the model image of the housewife was usually softer and slightly more rounded. The housewife’s posture was also more self-conscious than that of the uninhibited Fisher Body Girl. To achieve the elegant features that made the Fisher Body Girl different than the average housewife, illustrators sometimes added “more than a foot to their everyday heights and stretched their elongated eyes, fingers, legs, arms, and necks to grotesque proportions” (Marchand 179). Some of the women suggested a height of over nine feet, and it was this blatant manipulation of the feminine form that conveyed that the woman of high fashion and, by implication, all women of high social status were physically distinct from the women of lower social position (Marchand 182).

Male and female portrayals were equally distinctive. Although men were sometimes depicted in modernistic illustrations, never did the “advertising artist distort and reshape men’s bodies as they transformed women into Art Deco figures” (Marchand 179). Women also took on the contours of their modern art backdrops more bluntly than did men, suggesting their use in art and their ability to be more art forms than human forms. In some tableaux, women appeared to function as decorations for the depicted room, as much as did the sculptured art objects or the curtains. The women of the time also bore only a meager resemblance to the Art Deco models of the Fisher Body ads. Nystrom estimated in 1928 that only 17 percent of American women were both relatively tall and slender. In fact, only this small percentage of American women were both thin and over 5 feet 3 inches in height. To be beautiful for the woman was to transcend anything that Mother Nature intended and to enter a world only frequented by the paintbrush and the discriminating eye.

Although times have changed, the images women are subjected to have lingered. Author Stephen Fox says that advertising produces “an especially visible manifestation, good and bad, of the American Way of Life” (Barthel 185). This
“American Way of Life” is promoted through ads that promise beauty and control over our own bodies and destinies. A woman is told that spending may be the secret key to achieving status, beauty, self-worth, social approval, and love. In the ad world, “Dreams rarely come cheap, social class is rarely so readily changed, the transcendence promised by ads seldom so easily won” (Barthel 102).

In Dr. Mary Pipher’s book *Reviving Ophelia*, she speaks of the dangers of being not only a female in today’s society but a young female. She reflects on a quality that has contributed to the American Way of Life: “Beauty is the defining characteristic for American women. It’s the necessary and often sufficient condition for social success” (Pipher 183). She goes on to say that “It is important for women of all ages, but the pressure to be beautiful is most intense in early adolescence. Girls worry about their clothes, makeup, skin and hair. But most of all they worry about their weight” (Pipher 183). Media’s role as Big Brother fosters such images. Dr. Pipher, a clinical psychologist who has treated girls for over twelve years, remembers working with Cassie. Cassie sounds like the typical adolescent girl. Her family owns a VCR, stereo system, two color television sets, and six radios. Cassie and her friends have been inundated with advertising since birth, and “while most of her friends can’t identify our state flower, the goldenrod, in a ditch along the highway, they can shout out the brand of a can of soda from a hundred yards away” (Pipher 243). Dr. Pipher speaks of Cassie being exposed to years of sophisticated advertising where she had the idea that happiness originates from consumption of the “right” products drilled into her head. Pipher says that she is sure Cassie “can catch the small lies and knows that adults tell lies to make money. We do not consider that a sin—we call it marketing. But I’m not sure that she catches the big lie, which is that consumer goods are essential to happiness.” (Pipher 243).

Girls’ magazines like Cassie reads are no different, as far as content is concerned, from women’s magazines. Both specialize in makeup, acne products, fashion, thinness, and attracting either men or boys. But girls’ magazines impress girls at a crucial point in their lives and shape how they will react as women reading *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle*. Some of the headlines in teen magazines scream of such things as: TEN COMMANDMENTS OF HAIR, GET THE LOOK THAT GETS THE BOYS, and TEN WAYS TO TRIM DOWN. Some reflect the greater stress that the 1990s offer to young consumers: WHEN STRESS HAS YOU DOWN, THE STD OF THE MONTH, GENITAL WARTS and SHOULD I GET TESTED FOR AIDS? Others would have been unheard of in the 1950s: WHEN YOU’RE
HIGHER SEXED, IS ONE PARTNER ENOUGH? and ADVICE ON ORGASMS (Pipher 244). Girls are being exposed to adult concerns, advice, and information at an increasingly young age, especially as the young girl's reality becomes enmeshed in the adult world.

Advertisers as the foremost source of girls and women's advice have many methods to manipulate the natural. The entire process involved in appearance, according to author G.H. Stone, "can be studied by examining the responses mobilized by clothes. Such responses take on a variety of at least four forms: identities are placed, values appraised, moods appreciated, and aptitudes anticipated" (Millum 66). This programming of what is desirable and what is unattractive is voraciously controlled by advertisers, who utilize a variety of methods to shape and direct those identities, moods, values, and attitudes. But conforming to these values and attitudes is a tricky thing. We demand "average," but we admire people with extraordinary qualities, like abnormally large eyes. Not only is this tricky, but it is very painful. In having "mass media confirm general conventions of the ideal type," we also "search out the exceptions to it" (Millum 56). The society that has given us the opportunity to pursue a life of happiness has also limited our ability to pursue it, by creating inflexible and narrow beauty standards. This is especially true of those who have limitations in beauty. From acne to facial scars to birth defects, we wear our imperfection as thorns, we know that the world out there sees those thorns, and we know that it is keeping notes. The media tells us so.

The cosmetics industry has helped women avoid the ostracism that comes with "bad beauty notes." Nancy Ectoff, a neuroscientist at MIT, concludes that "every culture is a beauty culture. I defy anyone to point out a society, any time in history or any place in the world, that wasn’t preoccupied with beauty" (Springen 68). However universal, the cosmetics industry is geared heavily toward Western society: "The specific use of cosmetics and the feelings women have about not being caught ‘without their face on’ seems to be something that is culturally learned in a Western society” as the woman expects to be “looked at” rather than the active “looker” (Millum 60). The need for cosmetics to offer the "looker" the ideal image to be "looked at" runs rampant in women's magazines, and "Even the most casual peruser of woman's magazines can hardly help being struck by how much critical attention is devoted to women's bodies, how much self-hatred is encouraged in ads that ask, 'Dark Eye Circles? Age Spots? Freckles?'' (Barthel 159). Thus, the woman turns to the paints and powders that will best achieve the ideal beauty. No more is the average
American woman a mere person, but she tends to “view her body as a craftsman or artist views his raw material” (Millum 60). We owe much of this to the development of an industrial and consumer society and the more recent coinage of the term glamour: The word beauty itself comes from the Latin bellus, a diminutive of bonus or “good.” Glamour was derived instead from Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron, who suggested the dark and sensuous woman as a counterpart to the blond and virtuous female. Social critic John Berger views glamour as “linked to the development of capitalism and the element of envy associated with the assumption of a mobile class structure, replacing the formerly rigid caste-like divisions” (Barthel 115).

An inventory of characteristics of the “actor” within ads that hone the ideal social image is based on appearance, which includes age, sex, race, size, and looks; manner, which includes expression, pose, and clothing; and activity, which means the actual act of doing. Appearance is often influenced by the way photographs are taken. There are finely woven yet observable phenomena that are incorporated to achieve a certain appearance, manner, or activity: the woman is consistently shorter than the man; the woman’s hands are seen just barely touching, holding, or caressing—never grasping, manipulating, or shaping; a man is always instructing the woman; when a woman’s eye or head is averted, it is always in relation to whatever man is pictured with her; women are repeatedly shown mentally drifting, their faces lost and dreamy; women, much more than men, are pictured at a kind of psychological loss or remove from a social situation that leaves them unprepared for action; and whatever a man is wearing in an ad, he wears seriously, whereas whatever a woman is wearing she appears to be trying on, as though the clothes were a costume. The phenomenon often deals with how photographers position or place the actors they use. It is an almost “magical ability of the advertiser to use a few models and props to evoke a life-like scene of his own choosing” (Goffman 23).

Gender specifics help sustain a life-like scene that bleeds into reality. Ads which are targeted and employ males use masculine homilies like independent, savor freedom, adventure, and keep one’s cool. These all suggest the very essence of masculinity and offer advice into what it means to be the ideal man. Also, the very lack of readership and the variety and amount of magazines devoted to men limit the advertisement’s power and, thus, the plethora of images men are shown. In fact, “there are no men’s beauty and glamour magazines with circulations even approaching those of the women’s magazines” (Barthel 169). This fact is substantiated with the best-known male fashion magazine GQ, which has a circulation of a paltry 446,000 in comparison.
to Glamour's hearty circulation of over 2 million. The reason lies in the idea that men are traditionally supposed to make the “right” appearance in our society, to be well-groomed and tailored. What they were not supposed to do was be overly concerned with their appearance or their beauty. To be vain and overly concerned with appearances was to discard one’s manliness, not to be a “real man.” Male beauty is associated with homosexuality, and for most “real men,” proof of being a red-blooded American male is to distance oneself from the fashion industry (Barthel 171).

Most of the ads have a dominant theme—the masculine model is based on exactness and choice as “All of masculine advertising insists on rule, on choice...He does not neglect a detail...To know how to choose, and not to fail at it...” (Barthel 171). This exactness and choice is in direct conflict with female models based on passivity, complacency, and overwhelming narcissism. Keywords such as precision, power, and performance are masculine virtues, and these are often reflected in advertisements for vehicles. Advertisers recognized that such things as props and stances influence the overall scene, and such directed stances imply a “sense of dependence on the man for stability and balance, a willingness to make oneself into an interesting ‘object,’ and a greater vulnerability to the caprices of a dominating emotionality” (Marchand 185). Photographers also utilize solid, firmly planted stances for men and unbalanced, unstable stances for women. By using various methods, the advertiser has firm control over the tastes shaped and images produced and, ultimately, the images women fight to attain (Marchand 185).

Dr. Pipher writes that many of the “high-risk” girls she worked with picked up on a variety of gender specifics and were discovering some of the advertiser’s “magic tricks.” One of her clients, Cayenne, suffered torrents of emotional drawbacks as an adolescent, which left her vulnerable to the “bad crowd” in school. This vulnerable situation weakened her defenses against drugs and alcohol. Cayenne transformed from a spirited girl to a frightfully unhappy one before her parent’s eyes. Dr. Pipher worked and observed Cayenne, who picked up, according to Dr. Pipher, that “male voices carry more authority in commercials. Men are the doctors and scientists who give product endorsements.” Women, alternately, “sell products that have nothing directly to do with women—tires, tractors, liquor and guns.” (Pipher 42). Dr. Pipher also writes of one client who hated the Old Milwaukee beer ads that featured the Swedish Bikini Team, in which a group of bikini-clad women parachute onto a beach to fulfill the sexual fantasies of a beer-drinking man. The girl she worked with
observed that “Women are portrayed as expensive toys, as the ultimate recreation” (Pipher 42). Much of this recreation is for other men, and the world of advertising makes it clear that women are simply props—whether it be for other men, for a room, or for a design. Women are simply complements to their surroundings—pliable objects that set the stage for “bigger” and “better” things.

Women not only fight but die for the pictures that deny them human qualities and assign them roles as objects. Acclaimed social scientist Erving Goffman labels this mind-set as “small murders of the mind and spirit that take place daily.” He goes on to say that, as pictures, they are not “perceived as peculiar and unnatural beneath the surface of ordinary social behavior” (Goffman ix). Women learn this ultimately perilous “ordinary social behavior” at a young age. Elaine Landau in The Beauty Trap says that “children are introduced early to societal values. Often those values come from childhood stories...those who are kind and honest are beautiful...Mean-spirited, evil women are usually characterized as hags and ugly witches” (Landau 20). Landau says that “the message is clear: A woman’s exterior symbolizes what she is from within” (Landau 21). Social desirability research in psychology documents our prejudices against the unattractive, particularly the obese, who are considered to be lepers in our media-feasting culture. A recent study found that eleven percent of Americans would abort a fetus if they were told that it had a predetermined disposition to be obese. The disgust perpetuated in youth “denies not only the death but the life being lived as well” (Barthel 142) and forces women to remove themselves from life by embracing images that propel self-doubt and self-denial. Such images are found not only in Victorian ads. Those which cloud women’s self-concepts and scream LEAVE AN IMPRESSION or ASK YOUR PHARMACIST, ASK YOUR DERMATOLOGIST, ASK YOUR MIRROR appear in a recent issue of Mademoiselle (Crow 47). The youth so revered in our culture, in ads from Oil of Olay that insist on wiping away fine lines and preserving that healthy, youthful glow, is the same youth who is contaminated from the start in the most innocent of ways and continues to be contaminated by both cunning and cruel ads. The children’s tale may offer some contamination, but the mass media, which plays an integral role as entertainment and knowledge provider, is an even greater source of contamination.

This provider neglects the natural and focuses on what Kim Chernin, author of The Obsession and The Hungry Self, calls the “tyranny of slenderness.” Chernin contends that fat people are “so far out of the social swim that others treat them as
though they were not even present” (Barthel 142). In this way, the unnatural invades the natural, and we must force ourselves to “rescue the warm life trapped inside the frozen image” (Goffman 23). The “frozen image” nurses harrowing statistics. On any given day, half of America’s teenage girls are dieting, and one in five young women has an eating disorder. Eight million U.S. women currently have eating disorders. By excluding the image deemed imperfect, eight million women exclude themselves and, according to Susie Orbach, “postpone achievement of their dreams until they first achieve the magical ‘right weight.’ For them, life can be lived only by the thin” (Barthel 143). Girls and women binge and purge until their bodies fail. Nature can no longer recognize Her creation and the healthy attributes we should all desire. The advertising world offers up both Kate Moss, a virtual waif, and Cindy Crawford, healthy at 135 pounds. They have contrasting sizes, but they share certain qualities that are deemed societally superior. They have gone to great lengths to maintain those qualities, but the rest of society will go to greater lengths to defeat the natural (Springen 69).

Dr. Pipher speaks of the three things that account for the increased pressure to be thin in the 1990s. First, she says we have “moved from communities of primary relationships in which people know each other to cities full of secondary relationships. In a community of primary relationships, appearance is only one of many dimensions that define people... In a city of strangers, appearance is the only dimension available for the rapid assessment of others” (Pipher 183). Second, she addresses the “omnipresent media” which “consistently portrays desirable women as thin” (Pipher 184) and, third, “even as real women grow heavier, models and beautiful women are portrayed as thinner” (Pipher 184). It is this advertiser’s portrayal that has become increasingly slimmer and slimmer. The example Dr. Pipher offers is the 1950 White Rock mineral water girl. This child of pin-up advertising days stood a dwarf-like 5 feet 4 inches and weighed a hefty 140 pounds, compared to today’s 5 feet 10 inch, 110 pound glamour girl. To Dr. Pipher, “Anorexia is both the result of and a protest against the cultural rule that young women must be beautiful.” She also contends that “By her behavior an anorexic girl tells the world: ‘look, see how thin I am, even thinner than you wanted me to be. You can’t make me eat more. I am in control of my fate, even if my fate is starving’” (Pipher 174). Anorexia is a metaphor. It is yet another statement that woman will become what the culture—that package of marketing, entertainment, peer groups, and family—asks of its women, which is that they remain thin and non-threatening.
Anorexia enforces that a young woman is delicate, like the women of China who bind their feet in an effort to maintain the small feet the culture prefers (at the expense of broken bones and crippled mobility); she needs a man to protect her from a world that has gone awry and in which she has no control. Anorexic women’s diminutive size suggests that they will not stand out, get in the way, or take up much of the world’s space, for who is afraid of a seventy-pound adult? The pop song “Supermodel” echoes the sentiments of many anorexic girls. In a drastically determined way, the vocalist shrieks: “I’m gonna’ do it again. I didn’t eat yesterday and I’m not gonna’ eat today and I’m not gonna’ eat tomorrow, ‘cause I’m gonna’ be a Supermodel!” (Sobule “Supermodel”) When unnatural thinness becomes attractive, girls do unnatural things to be thin.

By focusing on weight as the paramount problem in her life, a girl turns from the underlying cause of her problems. One advertising testimonial actually suggests a woman’s underlying problem, but it offers the wrong solution. This testimonial tells the story of Polly Morgan who, one evening while nibbling on a carrot, was hit with the vision of a hearty but fattening meal. She nearly knocked over a chair running to the refrigerator, with the inspiration of corned beef smothered in gravy in her mind. The next thing Polly knew, she was tearing through the tin foil of corned beef from several dinners ago. It is only after she is done eating that she realizes that she never even liked corned beef in the first place. This testimonial for a miracle diet ad is wickedly suggestive of an emotional eating disorder. Such a disorder beckons treatment of a different kind—the kind found in therapy, counseling, and the integration of healthy food choices, not miracle diet cures that cultivate grotesque body images and constant cycles of binging and purging. These ads do not offer underlying causes as to “why” women and adolescents turn to self-starvation or, in contrast, self-gorging. For, as writer Susie Orbach contends, “Compulsive eaters are mouth-hungry eaters. All feelings are labeled as hunger. Eating becomes the way to deal with feelings. Compulsive eaters eat when they are tired, anxious, angry, lonely, bored, hurt, or confused” (Pipher 179). Orbach says the treatment does not lie in miracle cures and wonder diets, but rather in a treatment similar to that of bulimics, and that is of identifying one’s real needs and not labeling those needs as hunger. If one is restless, one needs stimulation; if one is angry, one needs change; and most of all one needs controlled eating. Media may offer some ready-made, Elmers-glue type of control, but that control is not stable and hardly harnesses the problem (Pipher 180).

Women dedicate themselves to a cause that assumes the seriousness of a religious quest. This dedication is shown in ads where women are encouraged to buy themselves
slim through a range of expensive diet foods, machinery, and assorted gimmicks. In the early 1980s four major “diet religions” graced the advertising halls. Each preached a different “creed,” and each promoted a different “good.” The Pritikin diet relied heavily on carbohydrates and very little fats, while the Scarsdale diet treated carbohydrates as sinful foods and relied on proteins. The third diet religion, the Atkins diet, relied on a high fat intake. Weight Watchers, the fourth of these diet fads, advocates a balanced diet of all foods. For those who enter the Weight Watchers realm, they can indulge in the Weight Watchers magazine, a variety of frozen dinners, as well as regular meetings and rituals of redemption. Beneath these diet religions exist a plethora of miracle diets, all aimed at working-class women who neither have the time nor the money to attend classy health clubs or partake in relatively expensive diet foods. Ads for such miracle diets offer promises like: “You can lose up to 5 pounds in 5 minutes, 5 inches in 5 hours, with Second Skin—the Space Age Slenderizer that Starts Erasing Extra Pounds and Unsightly Inches Instantly!” (Barthel 144), or “HOW TO RUB YOUR STOMACH AWAY—Arrived at through literally 6,000 years of observation and study of the natural principles of healing. It is only now that this ancient wisdom of the body is becoming available to you” (Barthel 146).

Curiously, health—the leading reason men go on diets—is scarcely mentioned by these ads as a reason why women should diet. Health runs a poor third to the social approval of one’s male and female friends and the personal approval of seeing oneself looking good in fashionable clothes. The British consumer magazine Which found that 58% of women lost weight to look good, compared to only 19% of men. Further, 76% of men go on diets for health reasons, while an unsettling 39% of women pursue dieting for improved health (Barthel 148). In following the advertiser’s advice, the woman’s body is transformed into, like the ad, a statement. She “transforms herself into an ad for herself, a complicated sign to be read and admired” (Barthel 150). The woman becomes the object she pursues and denounces herself and nature, in return for what society deems externally beautiful, at the expense of internally unattractive health ailments.

Defying nature is not a revolutionary idea, and advertisements are always looking for new ways to produce new images that allow women to buy an image as they sell themselves. New methods to defy the natural are constantly being produced. Women have had ribs removed, thighs suctioned, breasts siliconed. They have been lifted, tucked, snipped, and tightened. Their faces have been recast and resculpted. Plastic surgery is no longer even a practice anymore. It is an art. And the art of the advertiser often makes the disturbing images possible by creating unachievable physical body
ideals. We have seen methods shift from cosmetics to plastic surgery to colored contacts, and the climax will be when we have the methods to manufacture every aspect of the human being. This will occur when science lays the control in our hands and removes it from God, and advertising will be there offering its catchy one-liners, loud buzz words, pounding slogans, and addictive jingles every step of the way.

Advertisers play a variety of roles, especially in their tight relationship with women. One cannot trace every aspect of the beauty obsession back to one source—the advertiser. But, as Marya Mannes derives in the final chapters of *Advertising in Society*,

Advertisers in general bear a large part of the responsibility for the deep feelings of inadequacy that drive women to psychiatrists, pills, or the bottle. You keep telling us over and over that if we could use that or have this or look like that, we would be forever desirable, forever happy. So we spend our time worrying over the grey streak or the extra pound or the dry skin instead of our minds, our hearts, and our fellow men (Hovland and Wilco 454).

Advertising rose from the days of salesmen peddling their wares to multi-billion dollar corporations with phenomenal success rates, so the hold advertising has on America appears to be one that is resilient and will endure. Thus, it is up to women to have strong identities and convictions about their bodies.

Advertising not only enforces but reflects social ills, and by the process of condoning and approving, we are just perpetuating those ills. Reducing people to one aspect of their identities as the advertisement so keenly demonstrates offers us a very distorted and ill-functioning society. A functioning society allows us to advertise not a ready-made Barbie, but our own identities.
Works Cited


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